

Senator

Washington State Senator  
33rd Legislative District

KAREN KEISER

## Report From Olympia: 2006 Session



### How to contact me

I appreciate your letters, calls and e-mails on legislative issues. Please let me know if I can help on matters before state agencies.

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**Committees:**

- Health & Long-Term Care (Chair)
- Financial Institutions, Housing & Consumer Protection
- Labor, Commerce, Research & Development

Dear Friends and Neighbors,

Fast, furious, and extremely productive! And as an added plus for taxpayers and legislators, we ended the 2006 session of the Washington State Legislature a day early and with more than \$935 million salted away for the next budget cycle to pay for pensions and education. We also enacted some truly historic legislation:

- **Civil Rights, Anti-discrimination Law.** Nearly 30 years after it was first proposed, we finally passed legislation that prohibits discrimination against people based on their sexual orientation. This was long past due!
- **Medical Malpractice Breakthrough.** With Gov. Christine Gregoire playing a critical role in bridging the differences between physicians and lawyers, the Legislature took up where the voters left off when they turned down both initiatives last fall and passed a bill that advances the ball by, among other things, improving patient safety and setting up a voluntary arbitration system to settle malpractice disputes.
- **Columbia River Water Plan.** After 25 years of dispute, we came to agreement on a water management plan for the Columbia River, an excellent example of Western and Eastern Washington coming together to solve critical state issues.

Finally, as chair of the Senate Health & Long-Term Care Committee, I was particularly proud of all that we did to improve access to health care coverage and its affordability. I believe this was a truly productive 59-day session.

Sincerely,

Karen Keiser

# Health Care Issues

For a short session, we made significant strides on health care issues. Not only did we do the prudent thing by making a significant investment in our public health system so we'll be ready in the event of an avian flu outbreak, but we addressed the ongoing health care crisis in both traditional and innovative ways. Highlights included:

## Being Prepared

■ **Pandemic Influenza.** Experts are convinced that a pandemic outbreak of avian flu is a matter of when, not if. Under some scenarios, such an outbreak in Washington could lead to as many as 198,000 hospitalizations and from 4,000 to 38,000 deaths. I believe it's better to be ready than sorry. That's why I sponsored Senate Bill 6366, which requires local health districts to develop emergency response plans and provides \$9 million in grants and other support to get the job done.



pay at least 40 percent of the premium. With this approach, employers should be able to find decent coverage for about \$90 per month per eligible employee. The program will begin taking applications on July 1, 2007.

■ **Basic Health Plan (BHP) Expansion.** An additional 6,500 low-income adults will be able to enroll in the BHP, bringing total enrollment in this affordable plan to 106,500.

## Improving Access

■ **Small Business Partnership Program/House Bill 2572.** Thanks to this legislation, employers with low-income workers will be able to find more affordable coverage. Targeted at employers with 50 or fewer employees, this voluntary program provides premium assistance to employees who have incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. To be eligible, the employer must

■ **Community Health Care Grant Program/Senate Bill 6459.** Across the state, community groups are working to help people without health care insurance get medical care. This bill, which I sponsored, is designed to assist such groups – now up and running in Spokane, Olympia and Bellingham – in bringing their communities together to find local solutions to our health care crisis.

■ **Children's Health Insurance.** Last session, the Legislature made a commitment to work with the private sector to ensure that all children in Washington have health care coverage by 2010. To stay on target to reach the goal, this year's budget provides additional funding so 10,000 more children can be covered through the Immigrant Children's Health Program.

■ **Medicare Prescription Drug Co-pays.** With the implementation of the new Medicare Part D prescription benefit, thousands of our most medically vulnerable residents were transferred into the new federal prescription drug program. Thanks to new funding in the state budget, these low-income seniors will not have to pay the co-pay for each prescription.

■ **Blue Ribbon Health Care Commission.** The commission is charged with developing a five-year plan to improve access to affordable health care for all Washington residents. The report will be due at the end of this year.

## Helping patients

■ **Hospital Patient Billing.** Too often patients leave the hospital without a clue as to how much they owe for the care they received. Senate Bill 6189 is an effort to make billing procedures more understandable by requiring hospitals to provide discharged patients with more information about their bill, as well as who to call to get answers.

■ **Advance Directives Registry.** As the Terri Schiavo case illustrated, when a person becomes incapacitated, not every one agrees on how the patient should be treated.

Under House Bill 2342, people will be able to file their advance directives in a secure statewide registry that health care professionals can access to understand the wishes of patients when they can't speak for themselves.

■ **Patient Lifting.** Transferring and lifting patients can be dangerous to both patients and nurses. At a time when the state is experiencing nursing shortages, it's important to limit injuries as much as possible. House Bill 1672 seeks to do that by providing hospitals with a tax credit for acquiring mechanical lifting devices.



■ **Disciplining Health Care Professions.** As part of an effort to protect the public from incompetent and unprofessional doctors and nurses, House Bill 2493 tightens up requirements related to the licensing and sanctioning of all health care professionals.

## Containing costs

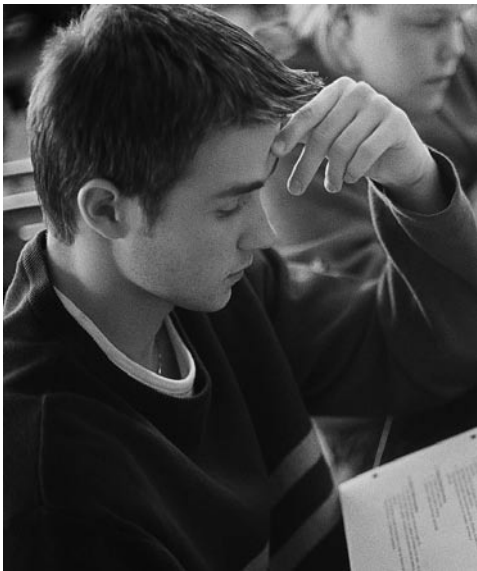
■ **Evidence-Based Technology Assessment.** With health care costs increasingly being driven by new and emerging health care technologies and treatments, the Legislature passed House Bill 2575 to create a Technology Clinical Advisory Committee. It will use evidence-based methods to ensure that the state covers proven and effective health care services for low-income families and state employees.

■ **Medical Malpractice Reforms.** A landmark effort (Senate Bill 2292) to resolve the contentious medical malpractice issue -- given a kick by the voters' strong rebuke last fall of two competing initiatives -- culminated in a legislative breakthrough this session that is aimed at improving patient safety, reforming practices in the medical malpractice insurance market and improving the civil justice system.



## Education: paramount duty

This year's 10th-graders will be the first students required to pass the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) to graduate.



- **Alternatives to the WASL.** Recognizing that there are other ways students can demonstrate their knowledge and skills, the Legislature is providing alternative methods for students to show their competency. The budget also allocates \$28 million in additional funding to help students achieve high academic standards.
- **Expanding enrollments at college.** A boost in funding will give an additional 500 students the opportunity to get an affordable college education in Washington.

## Energy & Environment: cleaner fuels and water

- **Cleaning up Puget Sound.** Steps were taken to ensure clearer waters in the Hood Canal and throughout the Puget Sound by requiring local health authorities to develop plans to repair failing septic systems that are threatening the Sound's ecosystem.
- **Renewable fuels.** To help farmers find alternative uses for crops, as well as promote cleaner air, we set a standard that automotive fuels sold in Washington contain at least 2 percent bio-fuels by 2008.
- **Recycling E-Waste.** The rapid expansion of consumer electronic products has created a growing problem



with the discarding of old products as new ones are purchased. Electronic manufacturers of TVs, computers and monitors will now work in partnership with the state in maintaining recycling programs for unwanted items.

- **No more state parking fees.** We repealed the unpopular \$5 parking fees, which should bring more families back to Saltwater State Park and all our parks.



## OTHER STATEWIDE ISSUES:

**Sex offenders:** In the aftermath of several frightening child sex abuse cases, lawmakers listened to prosecutors and adopted a package of more than a dozen bills that crack down on sex offenders, including:

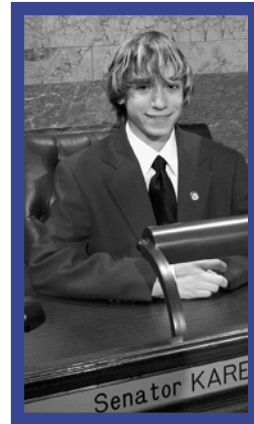
- **25 –year sentences.** HB 3277 requires a 25-year prison sentence for first-time rapists and child molesters under certain circumstances, such as when the victim is particularly young or vulnerable.
- **Pornography.** SB 6172 boosts penalties for possession of child pornography as well as communicating with a minor through the internet.
- **Limiting where sex offenders can live.** SB 6325 prohibits people who have committed serious sex crimes from living within two blocks of a school, extending a law that was set to expire this year.
- **Tracking sex offenders.** HB 2407 would allow the state Department of Corrections to require electronic monitoring as part of community supervision.

**Family & medical Leave:** With the federal law that provides emergency leave under attack in Washington D.C., the Legislature enacted my bill (Senate Bill 6185) that ensures that Washington families are guaranteed the right to take necessary unpaid leave when a family member needs care with a serious health condition or a new baby.

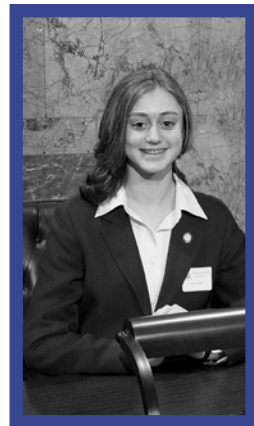
**Moving the primary:** To ensure that every valid vote is counted, we need to make sure there is enough time between the primary and the general election. That is why this session we approved moving the date of the primary up a month, to the third Tuesday in August. We also established spending limits for judicial campaigns, which is a good step toward ensuring the integrity of our courts by heading off the politicization of judicial races, which has occurred in other states.

**Unemployment insurance (UI):** UI benefits for laid-off workers will be protected. Businesses' payments into the system will decrease under a bipartisan agreement hammered out in the final hours of the session. This was a difficult dispute that ended in a "win-win" for each side

**Tougher drunk driving laws:** Driving under the influence can land a repeat offender in prison under a new law that makes five DUI convictions within 10 years a felony, rather than the misdemeanor it currently is.



A.J. Wakefield



Christa Smith



Eleanor Johnson  
(Shown here celebrating the Seahawks' great season.)

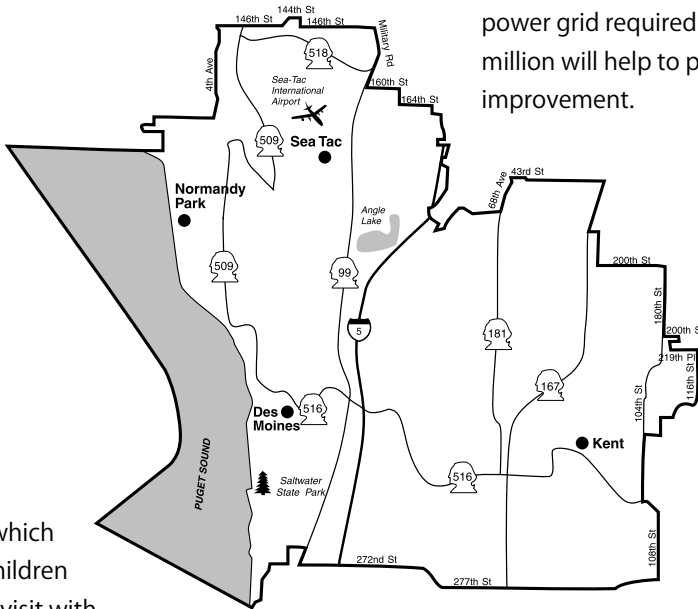
A.J. Wakefield of Kent, Christa Smith of Des Moines and Eleanor Johnson of Des Moines learned about the legislative process during their week as pages.

*Thanks to our 2006 Legislative Pages!*

# 33rd District: addressing local issues.

**Des Moines Creek Trail.** Thanks to a \$250,000 appropriation, the Des Moines Creek Trail, which starts at S. 200th Street, will be completed all the way to Des Moines Beach Park, now a National Historic Landmark.

**Safe Havens.** The facility, which provides a safe place for children who have been abused to visit with family members, will be able to serve more families with a \$50,000 boost in state funding.



**Highline Community College.** A deteriorating power grid required rapid replacement by HCC. \$1.7 million will help to pay for the cost of that critical improvement.

**King County Sexual Assault Resource Center.** The budget includes \$150,000 in additional funding for outreach and prevention services.

**Saltwater State Park.** With the repeal of the \$5 parking fee, this park will be more welcoming to the citizens who own it.

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